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PA/HO Department of State  
E.O. 12958, as amended  
April 21, 2005

THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

ACTION

August 11, 1969

FROM: Henry Kissinger *HK*

SUBJECT: Nigeria-Biafra Peace Initiative

In response to your instruction to consider a Presidential initiative to conciliate Nigeria and Biafra, the following is a run-down of (1) the major elements we would have to deal with in peace negotiations at this point in the civil war; and (2) your options in directing the initiative, with a recommended plan of action.

The Two Sides

Your prestige would probably bring the parties together in fairly short order. The war has ground again to a bitter stalemate with no break in sight. Both sides could find reason at least to show up for a serious negotiating effort -- the Federals because they recognize that their chronic weakness in leadership and logistics will mean continuing military frustration; the Biafrans because they are realistically uncertain about their own prospects in a war of attrition.

The central problem is to get to the conference table and stay there in such a way as to avoid the histrionics and maneuvering that wrecked earlier mediation efforts by the OAU. As always, the two delegations will be looking nervously over their shoulder at skeptical colleagues back home while worrying about the motives of the mediator. Moreover, there is a special difficulty in the unevenness of the match -- the Biafrans are easily the more skillful bargainers, with an oft-proven capacity to embarrass or humiliate the Federals and even the third party. The Federals have learned this the hard way and will approach any talks very gingerly.

Other Powers

The British would clearly like the glory of reconciling their colonial offspring, but Wilson is all too firmly dug in on the Federal side. For Whitehall, a US mediation effort would probably be an embarrassment at the least. And if negotiations issued in anything but a unified Nigeria, it would be a substantial failure of policy for Wilson personally.

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The French would favor talks as a way out of de Gaulle's involvement in this nasty little war. But their commitment to Biafra is still strong enough to make them demand some comparable pressure from others on the Federals before using their own leverage (via arms supply) on Ojukwu. Both Paris and the Biafrans would be watching our mediation effort closely for any favoritism toward the Federal side.

The Soviets have everything to gain by a continuation of the war. Their stock rises steadily with the Federals in direct proportion to their arms supply and Nigerian resentment at the Western relief efforts in Biafra. Yet this is not a major investment for Moscow, and their influence is not decisive with the Federals. We would simply have to count on a natural Soviet penchant to scuttle our effort as best they could.

The Africans. Behind the ritual declarations of OAU jurisdiction in this problem, the Africans are probably resigned to their obvious impotence and would quietly welcome a serious US initiative. Haile Selassie on the Federal side and Houphouet-Boigny with the Biafrans might be helpful at a critical moment. The African tolerance of outside intervention would be grudging, however, and we should expect charges in some quarters of "neo-colonialism" and "meddling", particularly if we fail.

#### The Settlement

On top of all these tactical considerations, we would have to weigh very precisely the broad range of very complicated and stubborn issues which divide the two sides -- questions of amnesty, autonomy, oil revenues, tribal protection, etc. It will be a subtle and arduous process just to establish the possibilities for compromise. There may simply be none at this point. And even if there are, we run the risk that one or both sides would try to draw us into responsibility for the post-war arrangements.

In my judgment, however, neither the costs of failure (African jibes and Soviet advantage) nor the potential risks of success (British pique and temptation to post-war involvement) should discourage a serious effort at mediation. Left to the parties, the war has three possible outcomes -- all inimical to our interests.

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1. Stalemate starves Biafrans, feeds Federal frustration with xenophobic dangers to our investments and nationals, helps the Soviets get a troublesome foothold.
2. A Federal military win means atrocities against the Ibos, Biafran guerrilla warfare sabotaging Federal oil (some US investments), and chronic instability in Nigeria.
3. A Biafran military victory, if born of Federal exhaustion, could splinter Nigeria and create new irredentism analogous to the Middle East. Thus, it is clearly in our interests to get this war stopped in a negotiated settlement.

#### Options

As I see it, we have four principal alternatives in tackling a settlement of the war. We would want as much help as we can get from other powers and the Africans in any case. The question is how to organize that support most effectively if we seize the initiative.

1. Four-Power Discussions. Discussions among the US, USSR, UK and France would have the advantage of going directly to the key issue of arms supply on both sides. But the French would be reluctant to enter what they see as a 3 to 1 line-up against Biafra, and the Africans would bridle at such a transparent reminder of their client status.
2. US-Canadian. Ottawa shares with us both an interest in stopping the war and the advantages of non-involvement. Then too, the Canadians are good negotiators with some shrewd African hands. There would be predictable problems, though, in orchestrating the effort. Canada could find herself in an awkward position between the British and the French.
3. US-Ethiopian. This approach has the obvious merit of covering our African flank. But we would be taking along a liability in that (a) the Biafrans simply don't trust the pro-Federal Emperor, and (b) the Ethiopians are not deep in staff talent, either in Lagos or Addis.
4. US Good Offices. The main advantage here is undivided control of the process and an unfettered pursuit of our own interests. With that freedom, of course, are the drawbacks of high exposure and undivided blame for what goes wrong.

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### The First Step

I do not think, however, that you need decide among these approaches as a first step in an initiative. On the contrary, it makes sense to do some very quiet spadework with the two sides to establish exactly what we have to work with, and thus where great power and African leverage should be applied.

There are two clear lessons of the past OAU failures: (1) the need to probe deeply the positions of the two sides and prepare carefully in secret before actual negotiations begin; and (2) the necessity of a scrupulously even-handed approach which is credible to the Biafrans (as OAU and British efforts have never been). We can meet that first requirement most easily working alone. And we can satisfy the second with a quiet probe directed from the White House rather than State, which the Biafrans regard as staunchly pro-Federal.

I would propose a secret approach to both sides to test the basic willingness to accept mediation. We would be probing for possible overlap in positions, requirements for venue and public posture, the relationship of talks to a cease-fire or arms shipments, etc. We might do this with a special mediator brought in from the outside, but it would be best to direct the approach with less conspicuous members of our staff here.

In my view, we need this foundation of knowledge before we face the choice of how to proceed in terms of our own direct role and the relationship of the other powers. A probe which draws a blank will cost us nothing with the two sides. And it is well short of active mediation if the prospects seem too thorny to proceed.

From what we know now of attitudes on both sides, there is a reasonable chance of finding some common ground and building on it. But as I have sketched above, there are numerous pitfalls both in the substance of a settlement and the motives of other powers. I am persuaded we should move ahead with a peace initiative, but only after we have charted the ground as fully and as quietly as possible.

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Timing

I see no problem in immediate action on the probe. Clyde Ferguson has had the two sides together secretly in Geneva for another round of relief talks, but relief negotiations will -- and should -- proceed at their own pace apart from the deeper political issues. Our probe need not conflict in any way with concurrent efforts to break the relief impasse.

As for other peace initiatives, there are simply no wires to be crossed at the moment. The Pope's much-publicized effort during his trip last week to Kampala, Uganda was a total failure, taken seriously by neither side. The initiative we had discussed with the Ethiopians during the Emperor's visit -- an Ethiopian approach to the Federals with a Papal-directed black bishop going to Biafra -- is languishing. The obstacles there are the Pope's lack of political leverage on Biafra and a general spirit of disillusionment among the Ethiopians. We would check again carefully, of course, not to offend other would-be peace-makers. At the moment, however, there seems to be a clear field -- and an obvious need -- to try to get the parties to talk sense about this largely senseless stand-off.

Recommendation

That you authorize me to tell Elliott Richardson to start a secret probe of negotiating possibilities in both Nigeria and Biafra.

Approve



Disapprove \_\_\_\_\_

See me \_\_\_\_\_

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